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OPEN LETTER TO THE HONORABLE MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The Honourable Minister of Foreign Affairs

Government of Australia

Canberra.

Dear Mr Evans,

I am the mother of Kamal Bamadhaj, a student at the University of New South Wales, who was shot by the Indonesian military in Dili, East Timor, on November 12. Since then I have talked to people who witnessed that massacre, and read what I can in an attempt to understand a situation where so many young people, like Kamal, lost their lives.

In light of what I have found out, I was suprised to hear a BBC interview in which you regretted the November 12 killings as a setback for East Timor where so much progress and improvement had taken place. In three weeks I have read and heard many things which show this viewpoint to be wrong. The same information is surely available to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, concerning a 16 year old issue only 560km from Darwin.

No one denies the improvements in infrastructure Indonesia has brought to East Timor - roads, schools and clinics. But the most basic human right - the right to life and security under the law - is denied the East Timorese, and intimidation by the military has been worsening, not improving, over the last two years.

It was on one of those roads that Kamal was shot and left to bleed to death and it was from those schools that the students came who were gunned down at Santa Cruz cemetery.

Amnesty International reports since 1985 have documented "persistent reports of extrajudicial executions and hundreds of unresolved cases of disappearances." Its most recent report, tabled to the United Nations in August of this year, reports "an accelerating pattern of short-term detention, torture and ill treatment of alleged political opponents", mostly students in the 15 to 25 year age group.

A month before the November 12 killings, Bishop Carlos Belo of Dili, appealed to a colleague in Portugal: "Our situation has worsened in the past few weeks. As the visit of the Portuguese parliamentary delegation nears, the Bapaks [the term used for the military] have once again started a campaign of terror, of threats. Anyone who approaches the Portuguese will be killed. There is no climate of freedom..The streets of Dili are controlled. People's homes are being searched at night. All the towns are full of intel [intelligence agents]."

It has been the hope of those states who want friendly relations with Indonesia that time would solve the East Timor problem. They pass on Indonesian claims that portray an dwindling band of Fretilin desparados holding out in the bush, while the next generation is being persuaded through Indonesian schools and material progress to accept their inclusion in Indonesia.

November 12 shattered that convenient myth. All the information available to us over the last two years points to the fact that the independence struggle has been taken over by the students and its locus shifted to the towns. It is this "integrated generation" which has risked its lives three times since the Pope's visit in October, 1989, to demonstrate their opposition to integration. They have become the main targets for arrest and torture. They were the bulk of the crowd on November 12, which was unarmed, but defiantly pro-independence.

The military reaction was not an aberration, but the intensification of a deliberate policy of military terror against any opposition to total Indonesian control. The difference was the presence of Western journalists, and the death of Kamal, which put this massacre on the front pages of the Western press.

The military build up in East Timor also gives the lie to the picture of a happily integrated 27th province. In 1985, the Indonesian government claimed that around 500 Fretilin guerrilas were still hiding in the hills, while Indonesian troops numbered 7,000. A year ago the Indonesian estimate of Fretilin remnants was 200, but there were 10,000 Indonesian troops. In September, seven additional battalions were sent to East Timor, bringing total troop numbers to 15,000, to police a Timorese population of only 600,000 people.

In such an atmosphere how can any inquiry by the Indonesian authorities be what your Prime Minister calls a "dinkum inquiry"? One wonders even about your trip to East Timor. Who will tell you anything but the official version of events, Mr Evans, when the likelihood of dissenters being picked up and disposed of is so high?

Only an international inquiry could approach the truth, and then only if a continued United Nations presence offered some security to those who testified.

Australian policy on Indonesia is rooted in an era when Indonesia was seen as a major bastion of anti-communism in Asia. That era has suddenly disappeared. It is hard to see the current Indonesian government as a bastion of anything other than authoritarian government, military repression and elite corruption. Of course, there is trade and oil, both legitimate concerns of your government. But at what price, Mr Evans? The genocide of the East Timorese? And how mutual are such arrangements if they require Australia to turn its back on its own ideals and get out of step with a world where concern for democratic institutions and human rights has moved to centre stage?

Australia has also taken the pragmatic position that it would be futile to support claims to self-determination, however legitimate, in a territory too small to be viable. But there are more East Timorese than Kuwaiti, and East Timor too has substantial oil reserves. And Australia has just participated in a war to protect the viability of Kuwait.

In the face of public outcry about the killings in Dili, you and your Prime Minister have promised a review of Australian policy on East Timor. People like me, and doubtless all the Timorese familes grieving for their lost children, can only hope that this review is more "dinkum" than the Indonesian inquiry. We hope that Australia will press immediately for an international inquiry under the auspices of the United Nations. This should be followed by talks with all parties, including Fretilin, which has been calling for a ceasefire and talks since 1989.

Military brutality almost guarantees the failure of integration in East Timor - you cannot integrate a people by shooting its children. Given that reality, East Timor will continue to be a running sore in Australian-Indonesian relations. It is therefore in Australia's interest to use what influence it has to press for a political solution to the East Timor question which incorporates the right of the EAst Timorese to decide their own future.

Yours sincerely,

Helen Todd.

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